

## When *Fabliau* Humour in Chaucer's *The Miller's Prologue* and *Tale* meets Chinese Translation and Culture

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As the father of English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer is not only famous in English-speaking countries, but also enjoys world-wide popularity. Most readers in China read Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (*CT*) in Chinese translations. It is widely acknowledged that, because of cultural differences, translations must, in one way or another, miss, add to, or change, things in the original works. The three Chinese translations of *CT* discussed in this essay have been chosen on account of their accessibility, comprehensiveness, style and time span.<sup>1</sup> These three translations are by: Fang Chong (方重) (1902–1991), from the 1930s; Huang Gaoxin (黄杲炘) (1936–), from the 1990s; and Zhang Gong (张弓), whose work was published in 2013. On the basis of the three Chinese translations, this essay will explain to English readers Chinese (mis)interpretation of Chaucer's *CT*, dealing first of all with Chaucer's treatment of fabliau as exemplified by *The Miller's Prologue* and *Tale* (*MT*).

Chaucer's *MT* can be traced back to the French *fabliaux*. *Fabliaux* are short narrative stories in verse. John Hines says that 'the earliest French *fabliaux* date from the last decade of the twelfth century and the latest seem to have been composed about one hundred and fifty years later, somewhere around 1340'.<sup>2</sup> Chaucer borrows from the *fabliau* tradition in *MT* to tell a story in which tricks are contrived to ridicule the dupe, there is a triangular relationship of husband, wife and lover (plus an extra lover), and word play and euphemism contribute to the effect of *fabliau* humour. When *romance* is the genre usually applied to life in the high social class, *fabliau* is the genre frequently used to depict life and scenes in the countryside and ridicule people of the lower class. People in them are mostly living in the countryside, less educated and vulnerable to deception. Thus the *fabliaux* are written in the vernacular, using colloquial and sometimes vulgar language and taboo words to dramatize the scenes. The information gaps between the

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1 In China, although translations of *CT* began one century ago, with Sun Yuxiu (孙毓修) (1871–1922), the student of a priest teaching in China, and Lin Shu (林纾) (1852–1924), acclaimed nationally as a translator, these texts are not easily accessible to the public, after the tumult of modern Chinese history. Their translations are not suitable subjects for analysis, because there is so much adaptation in their translations that they are more accurately new pieces of writing rather than translations. Lin Shu (林纾) in particular, though acclaimed in China as a translator, was much less a translator than a famous story-writer who rewrote Chaucer's *CT* into Chinese Kongfu stories with an English-to-Chinese translator's interpretation before him because he did not know English. He was the representative of extreme free translation in China especially welcomed in his times when few people knew and read English, and his 'translated' *CT* (《坎推倍利诗》) reads more like Chinese stories than English tales. According to Cao Hang (曹航) who writes 'Translation Studies and Research about Chaucer in China', Lin Shu's translation is found in hard paper copy in Shanghai Library, and currently the paper copy and the web source are not accessible to the public. Request has been made of Shanghai Library to grant permission to consult those early translated books of *CT*. When they are available, due attention will be given to their analysis of them and another essay further on this topic will have much earlier translated samples for comparative study.

<sup>2</sup> John Hines, *The Fabliau in English* (London and New York: Longman, 1993), p. 2.

conspicuous deceiver and the ignorant dupe and between the well-informed readers and parochial characters make good jokes and contribute to the popularity of widespread *fabliau* humour.

As Derek Brewer says, Chaucer's *fabliau* tales are not pornographic, because they are held in restraint.<sup>3</sup> They are the prototype of modern farces. Chaucer applies different registers and words to different situations and people in *fabliau* tales. He is a master of language, who combines courtly and vernacular literature; who manages to ridicule the upper and the lower classes in the way that they both enjoy and laugh about; who satirizes and criticizes to the greatest effect but with the least intention of doing that. Though over-interpretation of its moral sense will dull the reading of a piece of work, *CT* allows one to interpret the Tales as social critique. The root of the word *fabliau* is *fable*, which shows its inner connection to the moral concerns of the society and the philosophy of life. For cultural and historical reasons, the *fabliau* humour and satire are not, and cannot be, completely comprehended by Chinese readers. They appreciate and interpret humour differently. Given differences between Chinese and Middle English culture, language, and humour, the most representative are demonstrated in the following examples about *gentilesse*, word play, and body words.

#### Gentilesse

*Gentilesse*, the noun form of *gentil*, has more than one layer of meaning, and it can signify, among other things, noble birth, good manners, and good morals. According to the Middle English Dictionary,<sup>4</sup> the noun *gentil* primarily refers to a person of rank, 'of noble rank or birth, belonging to the gentry, noble' and often implies character or manners befitting one of gentle birth, 'having the character or manners prescribed by the ideals of chivalry or Christianity', such as 'noble, kind, gracious, courteous, polite, well-bred, charming, graceful, beautiful, handsome'. As an adjective, it can also apply to a nobleman, who is 'noble, gracious, refined, graceful, beautiful', though it may sometimes be 'used ironically'. Alan T. Gaylord says that 'at one pole the word may be associated with the manners of court and castle as an aspect of *curteisie* entailing genteel social conduct and gentle private relations, and at the opposite pole be more philosophically defined as *verray gentilesse*, true nobility, identified as moral virtue derived from the Divine Idea'.<sup>5</sup> Besides, the connotation of *gentilesse* changes as its context changes. It might be ironically associated with praise of or criticism of refinement and exquisiteness among the aristocracy, 'the conception of love fostered in a courtly society' and 'the technique of promoting lust into the game of romance'.<sup>6</sup> Some *fabliaux* use direct expressions of *gentilesse* in some places and more ironic ones in

3 Derek Brewer, 'The Poetry of Chaucer's *Fabliaux*', in his *Chaucer: The Poet as Storyteller* (London: Macmillan, 1984, pp. 107–20 (p. 109).

4 *Middle English Dictionary*, 'gentil', 2001–2014, the University of Michigan, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED18403> [27 January 2016].

5 Here 'the Divine Idea' is, I assume, similar to Charles Muscatine's idea about the medieval church doctrine (from one of the commandments of the God), which says that people should guard themselves against using any dirty words or expressions, and their mouths should never open to name a vulgar thing. Alan T. Gayland, 'Gentilesse in Chaucer's "Troilus"', *Studies in Philology*, 61 (1964), 19–34 (p. 20). Charles Muscatine, 'Sexuality and Obscenity', in *The Old French Fabliaux* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 134–35.

6 Gayland, p. 20.

others. In this case, satire is made for fun and laughter through the changing shades of meanings associated with *gentilesse*, and thus humour is produced for the amusement of the readers.

Before the *MT* comes the Knight's tale and as the pilgrim narrator comments, 'in al the route ne was ther yong ne old | that he ne seide it was a noble storye | and worthy for to drawen to memorye, | and namely the gentils everychon (3110–4).'<sup>7</sup> The Knight has the highest rank among the pilgrims going to Canterbury, and his tale is noble not only because it is a noble story told by a nobleman but because it is also a story for the noble purpose of education: it is agreed by people in the company that the tale is worthy to be kept in mind and specially for every one of the gentle folk. When *gentils* is rendered into modern English 'the gentle folk', there is a lot of difference in meaning. The high rank and noble blood required in the early *gentil* tradition becomes not essential in modern times; besides, the character and manners prescribed by the word is changed as society changes, and varies from nation to nation. Past British aristocratic lifestyle and former traditions of *gentilesse* are not shared by Chinese people. In the three Chinese translated versions of *CT*, the word is translated as '品德温良之人', '温文尔雅的人士', and '性情中人',<sup>7</sup> which means 'men of good character', 'men of good manners', and 'men of feeling'. The *gentil* Chinese who have good character and manners are not necessarily of high rank or noble birth, but according to the thoughts of Confucianism, must be, first and foremost, men of '仁(Ren)' and '礼(Li)', which are translated as men of benevolence and courtesy.

When these two Chinese characters are translated into English, they are not completely consistent with the original Chinese meanings because pictographic Chinese characters are hard to translate into corresponding English words. The formation and evolution of these two Chinese characters '仁' and '礼' tell, in their own ways, the connotations of the two words, which heavily influence Chinese counterpart of English *gentilesse*, or Chinese *gentilesse*, to be short. The oldest Chinese oracle bone script<sup>8</sup> wrote '仁' as '𠂔', which was composed of two parts, the left '亻' and the right '二'. The left '亻' (now '亻') is an abstracted side view of a standing human being, which refers to any individual ranging from the high emperor to the low ordinary people.<sup>9</sup> The right '二' (now '二') means equality, the same, or average. In the old Chinese Zhouwen script,<sup>10</sup> '仁' was written as '𠂔'. The upper '千' (now '千') means thousand, a great many, or the

7 The order of these Chinese translations, if not specifically mentioned, is in time sequence of their published *CT* by Fang Chong, Huang Gaoxin and Zhang Gong respectively, and later these translators' names will be called by the surname, namely, Fang, Huang and Zhang.

8 Oracle bone script (甲骨文), the ancient Chinese words written on the tortoise shells and animals' bones, was the oldest Chinese script prevalent in the time period between the 14th and the 11th century BC in Shang dynasty (商 c. 1600AC–c. 1046 BC).

9 '仁' is the first key word and core value of Confucianism. It was initiated by Confucius (551–479 BC), and later was developed into the idea of '仁政' (Renzheng: benevolent government), when he proposed his thoughts to the rivalling emperors in his times. His thoughts were later followed and advocated, though distorted in one way or another, by later emperors in Chinese history.

10 Zhouwen script (籀文), also called 'Dazhuan (大篆)' and 'Shiguwen (石鼓文)', appeared in the late Zhou dynasty (周 1046–771 BC) and was prevalent in Qin dynasty during the period of Spring and Autumn (春秋 770–476 BC) and the Warring States (战国 770–221 BC).

masses, and the lower 心 (now ‘心’) means heart, love and benevolence. Therefore, ‘仁’, as its meaning clearly shown in its own image, means love, benevolence and fraternity from all and for all.<sup>11</sup>

‘礼’ is another important quality after ‘仁’, both of which are required in Chinese *gentilesse*. It emphasizes good manners, which is synonymous with English courtesy, but has different associated meanings. The form of ‘礼’ is morphologically closest to 𠄎 in the ancient Chinese script called Lishu.<sup>12</sup> The character 𠄎 is evolved from the Zhouwen script 𠄎.<sup>13</sup> The script 𠄎 is the combination of earlier two characters in Jinwen script, 𠄎 and 𠄎.<sup>14</sup> The script 𠄎 has important associations related to Chinese courtesy. The upper 𠄎 is shaped like two clusters of jade (𠄎) fastened by knots (𠄎), and the lower 𠄎 is like a picture of the ancient Chinese Jiangu drum fitted into its stand.<sup>16</sup> The word in effect describes the grand sacrificial ceremonies in China: men hang clusters of jade and beat the drums to pay homage to the spirits in the heavens. According to the evolution of the meaning of the word ‘礼’, it is first used as verb, meaning ‘respect or pay respect to’, and then as noun, meaning ‘respectful attitude and behavior’. Later it gradually becomes the origin of the derivative nouns, ‘礼物(Liwu)’, which means respectful presents, and ‘礼服 (Lifu)’, which means respectful ceremonial dresses.<sup>17</sup>

With the background knowledge about these two Chinese characters ‘仁’ and ‘礼’, it is not difficult to understand the connotations of Chinese *gentilesse*. It can be inferred that Chinese *gentils* should have a heart of benevolence, show respect to others, be ready to receive others courteously, return others’ kindness with appropriate rites (and sometimes gifts), and in addition, be properly dressed on important occasions. The pilgrim narrator in the Miller’s Prologue speaks highly of the Knight’s Tale about the *gentils*: ‘This gooth aright; unboked is the male! |...Now telleth ye, sire Monk, if that ye konne, | Somwhat to quite with the Knightes tale (This goes all right; unbuckled is the mail! Now shall you tell, sir Monk, if it can be done, something with which to compete with the Knight’s tale) (3115–9).’ Next to the

11 This etymological knowledge and history of ‘仁’ is from the Chinese online dictionary, ‘象形字典’ (Vividict.com), an authorized website by the National Copyright Administration of the People Republic of China. It traces over 3000 most frequently-used Chinese characters in the pictographic way. 象形字典 (Vividict.com), ‘仁’, 2010. <<http://www.vividict.com/WordInfo.aspx?id=1556>> [17 March, 2016].

12 Lishu script (隶书) was the official Chinese script prevalent in the Han Dynasty (汉 206 BC–AD 220).

13 In 𠄎, the most right part 𠄎 means water, which is the replacement of the wine 𠄎. 𠄎, in the shape of running water, or spilt wine for sacrificial ceremonies, is simplified as the stroke of 𠄎 in Lishu script, and then ‘L’ in modern Chinese character ‘礼’. 𠄎 is in the shape of a large pottery jar for liquor, and the modern Chinese character for this word is ‘酒’, in which the left ‘𠄎’ means water, and the right ‘酉’ from the past 𠄎 means wine. In Chinese culture, water and wine are closely related to each other, and it is still a common phenomenon that when wine is not available or favoured, water serves the purposes in sacrifices, banquets, and other public ceremonies.

14 Jinwen script (金文), also called Zhongdingwen (钟鼎文), is script on ancient bronze, especially on Zhong (钟 the chime bells), and Ding (鼎 cauldron-like cooking vessels with two loop handles and three or four legs). As one kind of ancient Chinese script prevalent in Chinese Bronze Age, it was mainly used during the time between Shang dynasty and Qin and Han dynasty (秦汉 221 BC–AD 219).

15 Namely, 𠄎 draws the left part 𠄎 from 𠄎 and the right part 𠄎 from 𠄎 (𠄎 is later replaced by 𠄎, as explained in note 13). In character 𠄎, the left part has its origin in Jinwen script 𠄎, which originates from the earlier oracle bone script 𠄎.

16 Jiangu drum (建鼓), which literally means ‘a standing drum’, is an ancient drum played in imperial palaces since Shang dynasty. As its name tells, it is fit into a framework of wood as its stand and set up in a standing position when played on ceremonial occasions.

17 象形字典 (Vividict.com), ‘礼’, 2010. <<http://www.vividict.com/WordInfo.aspx?id=3871>> [17 March, 2016].

Knight in rank is the Monk. The narrator addresses him with the formal word *ye* instead of the informal word *thou*, and respectfully invites him to tell a tale to compete with the Knight. The formal address *ye* is not given much attention in the three Chinese translated versions, which tells that the Chinese translators are not conscious of the social ranks bred by *gentilesse*. When there are constant shifts of these two pronouns meant for different tones and occasions, Chinese translators do not observe these changes and ignore them. Chinese equivalent words for *ye* and *thou* are ‘Nin (您)’ and ‘Ni (你)’ respectively. Fang, Huang and Zhang all translate in this case the formal *ye* with the informal Chinese word ‘你’. The order by rank partially manifests English *gentil* culture, which is shared among the higher class and also by the society as a whole. The social community, including both the privileged and the not privileged, makes *gentilesse* a convention, a tradition, and even a rule. It is the drunken Miller who disturbs the rule of *gentilesse* and rises from his horseback to tell his tale: ‘[He nolde] abiden no man for his curteisye, | But in Pilates vois he gan to crye’ (He would not wait for any man, in courtesy, but all in Pilate’s voice began to cry) (3123–4).

The Miller, were he not drunk, might not be rebellious enough to break the rule and defy *curteisye*. Alcohol enables him to cast aside social etiquette. His voice is compared to that of Pontius Pilate, a controversial and pivotal character in the Bible who presided at the trial of Jesus. In medieval mystery plays Pilate is traditionally written as an inflated part for an over-the-top performer. Fang and Huang add footnotes to the transliteration of Pilate, both explaining that Pilate is a tyrant who prosecutes Jesus, and Zhang inserts the word ‘tyrant’ before Pilate’s name, with no further notes by way of explication. Why the Miller is compared to Pilate is not explained clearly, because it is not known to the average Chinese reader, who lacks the biblical culture and tradition. It seems important that the Miller, in his drunken state, should disobey the decorum of *gentil* society. He is like Pilate who speaks very pompously in a loud voice in public and who makes himself ridiculous. Emphasis on Pilate’s tyranny in the notes in the Chinese translations of the *ML* does not help Chinese readers much in their understanding of this aspect of the Miller. He is a character who disrupts the rule of *gentilesse* in the way that he would not obey the order by rank and in the way that he will tell a *fabliau* to compete with the Knight’s romance. This turn of genres exposes the tale-tellers’ lively competitiveness on an equal footing, and lays foundation for further revelation of tale-tellers as true-to-life characters.

When the Host intends to proceed by rank with the story-telling contest—‘Abide, Robin, leeve brother; | Som better man shal telle us first another. | Abide, and lat us werken thriftily (3129–31)’—he is reaffirming his belief that they had better follow social conventions. The Miller’s response—‘That wol nat I! | For I wol speke, or ells go may wey (3132–33)’—makes him a clown where *gentilesse* is concerned, or an iconoclast who dares to offend the old tradition. Interestingly, before he tells the tale, he makes a public avowal that he is drunk and if he speaks or says something wrongly it is the ale he has drunk that should be blamed. It seems that the Miller is sober enough to make use of his drunkenness as an excuse to jump the queue to tell his tale and speak about something not *gentil* but vulgar. Is it a trick the Miller plays to usurp the chance of telling his tale to *quite* the Knight’s tale of *gentils* and *gentilesse*? Or is it a trick

Chaucer plays through the Miller's voice to break *gentil* decorum? Why the Miller plays the drunk-and-sober trick and how the trick is received by the English and Chinese audiences, is difficult to establish, because readers keep changing, their understanding keeps changing, and the society in different times responds to *gentillesse* differently. Thus different cultures and changed contexts about the word *gentillesse* call for communication, and this communication contributes to the reception of the British *gentil* culture in different historical times and societies.

### Word play

Word play is what makes Chinese translation of the *MT* difficult; but for the original *fabliau*, it is a defining feature of the genre. The *MT* is a *fabliau* about a love-triangle (or quadrangle) where John, Nicholas and Absolon are rivals for Alisoun. John, a carpenter by trade, marries the young and beautiful Alisoun in old age. His trade suggests his secure economic status as a self-employed individual who helped shape fourteenth-century urban society. Lee Patterson says that these individuals were the agrarian workers and rural small-commodity producers, who were free from the reciprocal dependencies of feudalism, and comprised the most powerful forces for economic and social change.<sup>18</sup> Contrary to that, John is ironically depicted as an anti-hero, who is impotent to manage his domestic family life, not to mention social affairs. He is never free of dependency on others' words, because 'his wit was rude' (3227). However, his choice of a young wife at his old age defies Cato's advice that 'men sholde wedden after hir estaat' (3229). Unwise in the management of household affairs and feeling insecure as a husband, he fits the role of a cuckold husband in the typical *fabliau* plot: 'Jalous he was' (3224) and 'he demed himself been lik a cokewold' (3226). What John is most afraid of is what he becomes.

Compared with Alisoun's old dull husband John, Nicholas, the poor, smart and *bende* (3199) scholar living with them as a lodger, has learned and read a lot. His good taste in music and mastery of romance make him an invincible rival for Alisoun's favours. The *bende* Nicholas is *bende* in several respects: on the one hand, *bende* means 'clever', 'sly' and 'crafty'; on the other hand, it is derived from an Old English word meaning 'near at hand', which is a pun on Nicholas's 'living near at hand', his good skills of dealing with women, or 'his crafty way of using his hands'.<sup>19</sup> In Chinese translations, *bende* is translated into '调皮伶俐的', '殷勤的', and '乖巧伶俐的', which means 'mischievous and clever', 'flattering', and 'well-behaved and quick to react' respectively. Though these translations convey partly the meanings of being clever or quick to react, they do not carry slyness in their connotations. Besides, all of them deviate in some sense from the meaning of the word *bende*, and fail to reproduce the pun in Chinese.

In the rivalry of Nicholas and Absolon competing for Alisoun's love, the lovesick Absolon tries all means to woo Alisoun but meets his downfall when he confronts her. Patterson says Nicholas and Absolon offer a travesty of two forms of 'courtly' love: Nicholas is the predatory seducer who deploys the

18 Lee Patterson, 'The Miller's Tale and the Politics of Laughter', in *Chaucer and The Subject of History* (London: Routledge: 1991), pp. 247–260 (p. 247).

19 See No. 83 in Explanatory Notes by Christopher Cannon in the verse translation of *The Canterbury Tales* by David Wright. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. by David Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 488.

forms of courtly wooing in order to gratify his appetites, and Absolon is the narcissistic, ineffectual dandy who plays at lovemaking without understanding how to do it:<sup>20</sup> he is ‘wo bigon’; ‘he waketh al the night and al the day’; ‘he kembed his lokkes brode and made him gay’; ‘he woweth [Alisoun] by menes and brocage’, ‘and swoor he wolde been hir owne page’ (3372–7). What he receives for his labour is contempt and he is ‘blow[ing] the bukkes horn’ (3387), because Alisoun loves *bende* Nicholas, who has persuaded her into an illicit love relationship which excludes the outsider Absolon. The Miller comments with a saying: ‘Men seyth right thus: “Alwey the nye slye | Maketh the ferre leeve to be looth (3392–3).”’ This time the Chinese translations work well to convey the meaning of this sentence and the success, I assume, is partly attributable to the fact that there is a similar saying in Chinese that tells the same experience: ‘近水楼台先得月’(waterfront pavilion gets the moon first).<sup>21</sup> Modern Chinese now applies it more in a negative way, to express contempt for those who are cunning and so get what they want, such as power, money, and other benefits, by flattering others, or to express the way men get women by constantly courting them in a very eager and attentive way. In Chinese the moon, metaphorically, means ‘a beautiful woman’, so ‘近水楼台先得月’ means the man who is near the waterfront pavilion is favourably positioned to enjoy the moon, and a man who is near has a better chance of winning a woman’s heart than a man further away.

However, *bende* Nicholas’s success is temporary, and, as a Chinese saying goes, it is sometimes but not all times. After cheating John the jealous husband in his illicit affair with Alisoun, and after laughing at the amorous Absolon who is ridiculed by kissing Alisoun’s behind, Nicholas is confident that he can repeat Alisoun’s joke on Absolon. As the Chinese saying warns, fortune is misfortune in disguise; Alisoun’s success makes Nicholas over-confident: he moves his arse out to meet Absolon’s hot blade when Absolon returns for revenge. At length he ‘passively “suffers” being duped himself’, as David Lorenzo Boyd comments, and it is ‘a typical fabliauesque technique of disempowerment and submission...when the hot blade makes contact with Nicholas’s ass’.<sup>22</sup> The fabliauesque technique lies in the skillful plot arrangement—pride usually comes before a fall—and Nicholas’s strength incurs his downfall. His wits help to win over Alisoun, but they overreaches themselves and make him suffer. Clever Nicholas is the victim of his own cleverness. Once bitten, twice shy. With a price paid, Nicholas is disempowered to submit, and he is taught how to behave next time.

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<sup>20</sup> Patterson, p. 260.

<sup>21</sup> This saying is used for many times in its short form and becomes a very frequently used four-character idiom, ‘近水楼台’(Jin shui lou tai). The earliest record shows that the saying is from a poem written by Su Lin (苏麟) in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). When Fan Zhongyan (范仲淹) was the magistrate of Hangzhou prefecture, he promoted most of his subordinate officials he knew in and near the city where his official residence was. Su, who held the post of a patrol officer in a county far away from the city, was not known to Fan, and therefore he was not promoted. Su then took the chance of a business trip to the city, and wrote a poem to Fan to tell, in an implicit way, that he wanted to be remembered, cared and promoted. Fan read between the lines, understood what Su meant, and promoted him later. While the whole poem was lost trace of, the couplet was remembered and widely spread, ‘近水楼台先得月, 向阳花木易为春’(waterfront pavilion gets the moon first; plants facing the sun bring spring into earlier existence).

<sup>22</sup> David Lorenzo Boyd, ‘Seeking “Goddess Pryvetee”: Sodomy, Quitting, and Desire in ‘The Miller’s Tale’, in *Words and works: Studies in Medieval English language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson*, ed. by Peter S. Baker and Nicholas Howe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), pp. 243–260 (p. 251).

*Privee*, a synonym of *hende* in that both can mean ‘hidden and devious’, is the word used most frequently in association with Nicholas (next to *hende*). He ‘was sleigh and ful privee’ (3201). He ‘prively...caughte hire [Alisoun] by the queinte’ (3276). Alisoun told him of John, ‘Min housbonde is so ful of jalousie | That, but ye waite wel and been privee (3294–5).’ John believed Nicholas’s strange behaviour is because of his intrusion into God’s secret things, ‘Men sholde noght knowe of Goddes privetee’ (3454). Nicholas deceived John with his false story about a Second Flood, and said, ‘wol I speke in privetee, | Of certain thing that toucheth me and thee’ (3493–4). In addition to the idea that Nicholas’s punishment is self-afflicted, he is punished because he is guilty of blasphemy—he sodomizes God by ‘entering what he ought not’.<sup>23</sup> Namely, he is scalded in the *toute*, because his trick on John is based on his astrological knowledge which is privy to God. What Boyd says about the Christian religion is in accordance with the Chinese Taoist idea from *the Book of Changes*, ‘天机不可泄露’, which means that God’s design must not be revealed to mortal ears. Once it is revealed by someone, ‘泄露则阳寿折’, his lifetime will be reduced by God as punishment.<sup>24</sup> For example, he may die in some bizarre way years before his natural time, or he may experience some misfortune that results in his earlier death. Besides, Boyd thinks that Nicholas’s sodomizing God is a trope for social critique: ‘Robyn [the Miller] successfully addresses class injustice by associating John’s mistreatment with the queering of the dominant norm, that common people at the end of the *MT* believe the clerks (and the story of Nicholas and Alisoun) and laugh contributes to the poem’s sociopolitical imperative: by falling prey to clerkly (mis)interpretation, the people, such as John, are being duped as well’.<sup>25</sup> John’s cuckoldry, falling out of the tube, and his inability to appeal for his own rights, are the punishment for his blasphemy of God, and he is the victim of his own naivety. He is taught to believe he is Noah the savior, but ironically he is the most impotent man. While the powerless man is combined with the legend of the most powerful God, the plot arrangement about John is another successful example of *fabliau* justice by which John receives the most severe punishment of the three men in the tale. However, poetic justice in the tale is not justice in the readers’ mind. Though John is punished and ridiculed most severely, he deserves most sympathy in the tale, because readers will understand and sympathize with his frailty.

### Body words

Sensitive body words like *queinte*, *ers*, *toute*, *nether eye*, *hir hole*, and the scatological words *fart* and *pisse*, if labelled as obscenity, will not help explore the *fabliau* humour and social critique of the *MT*. But in Chinese culture, sensitive body words are taboo, especially those that describe female private parts.

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<sup>23</sup> Boyd, p. 247.

<sup>24</sup> Also translated as *I-Ching*, it was written during the (west) Zhou Dynasty (1046–771BC), and concerned astrology, the divination rituals, and the philosophy of nature. Ever since Confucius’s proposition to the emperor in the (East) Zhou Dynasty (771–256BC), it has become one of the classics of Confucianism in Chinese culture and tradition. It was combined during this time with the ideas of Yin and Yang and Taoist Taiji, and gradually became the most widespread body of folklore learning in Chinese history.

<sup>25</sup> Boyd, p. 247.

Nicholas is 'sleigh and ful privee' (3201), 'living alone withouten any compaignye' (3204), and appears to be as demure as a maid, though he has a great knack both in and out of bed. But 'whil that [Alisoun's] housbonde [John] was at Oseneye' (3274), 'prively he [Nicholas] caughte hire by the queinte' (3276) and confessed his love to her. In Chinese, this word *queinte* is either deliberately omitted in Fang's translation, '他忽然把她抱住' (he suddenly caught her into his arms), or vaguely referred to in Huang's translation '他偷偷捏住对方下身某处' (he slyly caught some part of the latter part of her body), or 'wrongly' thought of in Zhang's translation '他忽然从身后一把抱住她' (he hugged her from the back all of a sudden). Fang's omission and Huang's understatement show that they are aware that Chinese readers are not ready to accept such audacious behaviour from Nicholas and faithful translation of the word can only undermine the aesthetic effect of *Canterbury Tales*. That is partly the reason that Zhang makes 'mistakes' in his translation, because he is not accustomed to the ritualized male aggression in English courtly love and the marked words of sex organs in *fabliau*.

In *Feminizing Chaucer*, Jill Mann says that 'there is plenty of evidence that the conventional pattern of male aggression and female submission was a familiar one in medieval literature, as doubtless also in life', and Chaucer must know one of the best-known narratives of courtship in the Middle Ages, the *Pamphilus*, because it is a popular school-text in Latin throughout the medieval period. It tells the story of Pamphilus's wooing of the beautiful Galatea in which ritualized male aggression meets ritualized female reluctance and 'it is in the *Miller's Tale*...that the influence of the *Pamphilus* is most clearly perceptible: Nicholas's first approach to Alisoun is founded on the same paradoxical combination of physical aggression and verbal romanticism that Pamphilus shows to Galatea'.<sup>26</sup>

Nicholas takes the initiative to take her in his hands by force, and 'she sprong as a colt doth in the trave, | And with hir heed she wryed faste away. | She seide, "I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey!"... "Or I wol crye...Do wey youre hands, for youre curteisye! (3282-7)'" Besides, she afterwards shifts the way of addressing him from the informal 'thee' to the formal 'ye'—'but ye waite wel and been privee... ye moste been ful derne as in this case' (3295-7). Her reluctance to concede and her shift of addressing of him show that she wants distance between them. As a 'nice' woman she is not easy game; she drops the hint that 'male desire must at the same time express itself with an insistence strong enough to carry the burden of responsibility for the sexual act'.<sup>27</sup> 'Therof care thee noght', Nicholas picks up the clue and says, 'A clerk had litherly biset his while | But if he koude a carpenter bigile (3299-300).' He addresses her with the informal 'thee' to show her his intimacy and affection, his readiness to take the role of the male aggressor, and his determination to take the responsibility for their illicit love affair.

Except for *queinte*, other sensitive body words like *ers*, *toute*, *nether eye*, *hir hole*, are treated with similar evasiveness and care in Chinese translations of *CT*. Therefore, strategies are taken in Chinese translations to avoid direct encounter with those words, or reduce contact with them. Take phrases from the scene when Absolon is ridiculed at the window, for instance: 'at the window out she [Alisoun] putte hir hole'

<sup>26</sup> Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), p. 79; p. 80.

<sup>27</sup> Mann, p. 80.

(3732) and: ‘with his mouth he [Absolon] kiste hir naked ers’ (3734). The former line (‘at the window out she putte hir hole’) is vaguely translated as: ‘她的下部挪出窗外’ (she edged her lower part of body out of the window) by Fang, and ‘朝窗外露出一个部分’ (let show one part of her body) by Huang, or referred to by Zhang in a linguistically faithful but more polite way ‘将她的臀部挪出窗外’ (she edged her end out of the window). When direct treatment is unavoidable like the latter line (‘with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers’), translators choose to mediate the word *ers* by calling it ‘屁股 (bottom)’. The Chinese word ‘屁眼’, the equivalent of ‘arse’, will be never considered because it is extremely rude. Though it may appear in blue jokes or porn stories, it could never be associated with the works of the Father of English Literature, not to mention the Father of English Poetry. As Lin Huiyuan (林惠元) says, ‘Chaucer is the first poet who has made English poetry into art, and he deserves the praise of Father of English Literature’.<sup>28</sup> Since 1930s the most influential and representative books of *History of English Literature* in different Chinese historical periods have claimed Chaucer as the Father of English Literature, and given him a separate Chapter by way of introduction, which is not a favour shown to other English writers before him or of his time. These books are *History of English Literature* by Lin Huiyuan (林惠元) in 1930, by Liu Wuji (柳无忌) and Cao Hongzhao (曹鸿昭) in 1947, by Liang Shiqiu (梁实秋) in 1955, by Chen Jia (陈嘉) in 1982, and by Wang Zuoliang (王佐良) in 1996.

However, not all sensitive body and scatological words are sacrificed. Take *fart*, for example. Apart from Nicholas-Alisoun-John, in the second triangle of Absolon-Alisoun-Nicholas, Absolon’s image, as Hines says in *The Fabliau in English*, is ‘the product of nurture’<sup>29</sup> who acquires the refinement and exquisiteness among the aristocracy in medieval society: a ‘joly’ (3348), ‘jolif and amorous’ (3355) young man ‘in twenty manere koude trippe and daunce’, ‘pleyen songes on a small rubible’, and ‘song somtime a loud quincible’, and ‘as wel koude he pleye on a giterne’ (3328–33); he is fastidious about his appearance: curly hair with handsome parting stuck out like a wide and broad fan, close-fitting light-blue tunic with laces, red stockings and shoes carved with the pattern of St. Paul’s window. Besides, he is a versatile parish clerk who ‘wel koude laten blood and clippe and shave, | And make a chartre of lond or aquitaunce’ (3326–7), and he is popular in bars and taverns ‘with his solas’ (3334). He enjoys being respected and favoured by the general public. He is so obsessed with his nurtured image that he does not allow himself to answer the call of nature—‘But sooth to seyn, he was somdel squamous | Of farting, and of speche daungerous’ (3337–8). Absolon cannot ‘escape the vulgar facts of the body’s nature’ and ‘his artificiality can be seen as the root of his failure’ at being a lover.<sup>30</sup>

This careful arrangement of details in accordance with Absolon’s character ridicules Absolon to great effect and adds to the aesthetic value of the *fabliau* tale. If not for the use of this word, the *fabliau* humour in *MT* would not be so strongly felt. The image of Absolon is thus so vivaciously caricatured

28 林惠元, “Chaucer 的时代”, 《英国文学史》, 北京: 北新书局, 1930: 33–62, p. 62. Lin Huiyuan, ‘Chaucer’s Times’, *English Literature History* (Beijing: Beixin, 1930), pp. 33–62 (p. 62).

29 Hines, p. 116.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 116; p. 117.

that he becomes the epitome of ironic *gentillesse*. Differently this time, the word *fart* is translated faithfully in Huang's translation. Chinese readers must burst into laughter when they read later that Absolon who is 'somdel squaimous of farting' is 'almoost yblent' with 'the strook [of Nicholas's] thonder-dent [fart]' (3806–8). What he is most afraid of is what he cannot escape from. He ends up with an unavoidable confrontation with the most unwelcomed misfortune. While Absolon himself wants to be treated in the most civilized way, it is ironic to find him suffer Nicholas's *fart* in this way. However civilized the society, it is never possible for Nicholas to behave against human nature; however nurtured Absolon is, it is never possible for him to avoid confrontation with human nature. While the word *fart* is either ignored or downplayed in Fang and Huang's translation, Zhang's faithful translation of this word shows Chinese people's gradual open mind to the calculated vulgarity for the realization of the *fabliau* humour in *MT* in the new century. Chinese people are ready to embrace difference in this globalized world, a difference less appreciated by the earlier Chinese generations in the twentieth century.

This study of *fabliau* humour in Chaucer's *The Miller's Prologue and Tale* is an epitome of cultural differences among English and Chinese nations, which should not be taken at face value. First, *fabliau* humour in the tale is perceived, received, and even enjoyed differently for reasons relating to: 1) lack of such contextual knowledge as medieval living conditions, social organisation, culture, and conventions of characterization for the genre of *fabliau*; 2) differences between Middle English and Chinese humour and humorous and taboo words; 3) untranslatable poetic style, including stress, meter and rhyme. Second, cultural differences, if not handled appropriately, may breed misinterpretation, misunderstanding or even contempt, when instead they should become the medium of communication, cultural exchange, and knowledge. Last but not the least, however Chaucer and his works may be misinterpreted, the Chinese perspective offers a different view of reading Chaucer's works; misinterpretation is still interpretation, an interpretation that sheds a new light on Chaucer and his works with different voices and from different perspectives, and serves as an important comparative and complementary element of Chaucerian studies.

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